

Women get parole advantage

By Dana Beyerle
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MONTGOMERY — Under quirky circumstances, the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles is discriminating against male inmates in favor of women.

"It's not fair but it's legal," said Cynthia Dillard, deputy parole board director.

A special parole board set up last year to ease prison overcrowding paroled a lot of women in relation to their numbers.

But because the board has considered just about everyone remotely eligible for parole and because of the effectiveness of an expanded parole board, still-crowded prisons are gaining new inmates at a potentially record pace.

County sheriffs are being asked to help ease the potential burden.

Increased parole activity since April 2003 has favored females who are being paroled at a faster rate mostly because the state is under a federal court order to decrease the population of the Julia Tutwiler female prison from a high of 950 inmates to below 700, state officials said.

More than 25,000 men are in the state prison system.

Another reason for accelerated female paroles was the state opened a transition center for parolees to help ease them into the free world. Men don't have a similar halfway house but there are plans for one and that could speed up male paroles, parole board Director William Segrest said.

New board members began hearing accelerated dockets on April 6, 2003. While the actual number of men paroled has been higher, the parole rate for non-violent women offenders was more than half-again as much between then and Nov. 26, 2004, according to records.

Between those dates, 8,731 men

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were considered for parole and 3,439 were granted, for a rate of 39 percent.

During the same period, 1,204 women were considered and 733 were paroled, for a rate of nearly 61 percent.

In other words, men were denied 61 percent of the time while women were denied only 39 percent of the time, records show.

The average overall parole rate for the last three fiscal years was 37 percent in 2001, 46 percent in 2002 and 34 percent in 2003.

"I guess that if they're clearly focusing on women, I think they would be a fairness issue," said Lucia Penland, executive director of the Alabama Prison Project, an inmate advocacy group.

But as Penland pointed out, no one in Alabama has a right to a parole or a pardon.

Segrest said the board has considerable latitude in deciding who gets a hearing and who gets paroled, which are separate functions.

Dillard said although numbers weren't available, violent women offenders have been more likely to be considered for parole than violent male offenders.

For example, last week the parole board considered paroling a woman

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